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Resolve issue on Macedonia

Get beyond name; let it join alliance

By Representatives Bill Pascrell Jr. and Mark Souder

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Pascrell



Souder

The recent NATO summit reminded us that there are a number of disputes among the organization's diverse membership. But at the previous summit in Bucharest, all 26 member states were in agreement on one point: that the Republic of Macedonia – along with Albania and Croatia – had fulfilled what is known as "the MAP process," the process by which NATO decides which potential new members have demonstrated their readiness to join the alliance.

Croatia and Albania were welcomed as full members in April, but Macedonia remained conspicuously absent. Regrettably, an invitation for Macedonia to join NATO was not extended because of a dispute with Greece over the name of the Republic of Macedonia.

Our congressional districts have constituents from both communities, and both Macedonians and Greeks are our friends and neighbors. As members of Congress concerned about the future of NATO, we believe it is time to move past this dispute and find a reasonable solution to the name issue. Perhaps more importantly, we must reach a point where countries cannot be barred from NATO because of bilateral and domestic disputes.

We are not alone in this view. The UK's Charles Tannock, speaking in the European Parliament last month, urged Greece to change its position, stating, "I fear that Greece risks bringing itself into ridicule, and I urge the government in Athens to soften its line."

Canadian Defense Minister Peter MacKay recently said, "There has to be a way to unclog these efforts to drag some of the domestic issues into the alliance because that undermines the collectivity of what we're really attempting to do."

Similar views have been expressed by fellows at a variety of U.S. foreign-policy think tanks, representing the broad range of the ideological spectrum.

The Heritage Foundation's James Jay Carafano wrote, "The alliance must also reaffirm its commitment to bringing in new members. ... Group decisions should not require unanimity."

Shortly after last year's NATO Summit, Ivo Daadler of the Brookings Institution and President Obama's nominee for ambassador to NATO along with James Goldgeier of the Council on Foreign Relations wrote, "Like Croatia and Albania, Macedonia also fulfilled its MAP. But Macedonia was not invited to join the alliance because one NATO member – Greece – objects to the country's name ... to allow that to become part of the debate over whether Macedonia should be allowed to join the world's most successful alliance makes a mockery of the process."

Over the years, Macedonia has made numerous concessions in an effort to accommodate Greece. In the mid-90s, for example, Macedonians changed their flag and their constitution because of Greek concerns.

The republic fully understands that it does not have a monopoly on the name "Macedonia" and recognizes that there are 2.5 million Greek citizens living in Greece who also call themselves Greek Macedonian.

We are encouraged by additional steps the government of Macedonia is taking to reach out to their Greek friends. Antonio Miloshoski, Macedonia's foreign minister, recently proposed that Macedonia and Greece sign a Declaration of Friendship, Good-neighborliness and Cooperation and to create a Joint Committee on Education and History, tasked with educating schoolchildren on each country's history in an effort to calm emotions and create a joint understanding of each country's culture. It is a good idea and one that should be implemented to educate future generations of leaders in Macedonia and Greece.

It is regrettable that Macedonia has been kept from joining the alliance because of a bilateral dispute, and it is our mutual and sincere desire to see this issue resolved and for Macedonia to assume the place in NATO it has earned. Macedonia's president-elect, Gjorgji Ivanov, has pledged to work with Greece to resolve their differences and has stated that resolving the name dispute would be his first priority as president.

Finding common ground on this issue will contribute to the security and stability of the country, the region and Europe, creating what many of our presidents have long called for: a Europe whole, free and at peace.

Rep. Bill Pascrell Jr., D-N.J., and Rep. Mark Souder, R-Ind., wrote this for selected national newspapers.

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